Title: The simple bare necessities: the practices, rhetoric, scales and paradoxes of thrift on a London public housing estate

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Abstract

This article tracks how a trope of middle-class household thrift, grounded on the autarchic Aristotelian oikos, has long fuelled derogatory discourses in Britain aimed at low-income urban residents who practise quite different forms of thrift. Since the 1970s this trope has migrated across scales, proving a potent metaphor for national economic policy and planetary care alike, morally and economically justifying both neoliberal welfare retraction compounded by austerity policies and national responses to excessive resource extraction and waste production. Both austerity and formal recycling schemes shift responsibility onto consumer citizens, regardless of capacity. Further, this model of thrift eclipses the thriftiness of low income urban households, which emerges at the nexus of kin and waged labour, sharing, welfare, debt, conserving material resources through remaking and repair and, crucially, the fundamental need of decency expressed through kin care. Through a historicised ethnography of a London social housing estate and its residents, this paper excavates what happens as these different forms and scales of household thrift co-exist,

change over time and clash. Ultimately, neoliberal policy centred on an inimical idiom of thrift delegitimizes and disentitles low-income urban households of their capabilities to enact livelihood practices of sustainability and projects of dignity across generations.

Introduction

In 1913, Maud Pember-Reeves and Charlotte Wilson published their investigation into poverty to identify effective interventions to reduce child deaths. Based in London, their book charts how working-class households barely managed and sometimes failed to make ends meet on a weekly income of about a pound. Even though the households were not classified as the poorest of the poor, the living conditions they documented objectively and compassionately were appalling. Food was scarce and infant mortality high, one in five dying at birth.

Amidst accounts of how a sliver of soap might be husbanded and what expenditures foregone to ensure children were shod and fed, one item stands out. Despite the hunger and cold that haunted the dank rooms where these families lived, the mothers always made sure there was enough to pay the weekly burial insurance; the third largest outlay after rent and fuel. Pember-Reeves notes that some might say disapprovingly this was a luxury such families could scarce afford, but that the horror of a pauper's funeral and not being able to bury a child decently shaped the thriftiness of these housewives (ibid: 58, also Stedman Jones, 1974: 473). What price an extra meal if it came at the cost of dignity and respectability?

Their report reinforces two common themes from the 19th century to now in studies of low-income, urban households. The first is that respect (Stedman-Jones, 1974; Bourgois, 1995 for a US parallel), respectability (Skeggs, 1997) or decency typically outweigh other

considerations in working-class households. Arguably, this reframes the trajectory from necessity to decency to luxury that appears in the two main thrift-to-consumerism narratives identified by Alison Hulme (2018, 2019): those (e.g. McKendrick et al. 1984) that follow Thorstein Veblen's emphasis on upwardly-mobile emulation of conspicuous consumption (2009), and the related version that privileges a model of industrialised production driving increased demand (e.g. Galbraith, 1958). Both are tinged with moral panic about the apparent slide from thriftiness into consumerist degeneracy.

As the above suggests, rather than decency being a step up from necessities, decency can itself be a bare necessity trumping even the satisfaction of biological needs. Adam Smith spells this out: 'under necessaries, therefore, I comprehend, not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary' (1804: 296). Smith thus reminds us that to be fully human requires more, and sometimes less, than the needs of bare existence. Equally, much of economic anthropology, alongside concerns with well-being, happiness and the good life, have long insisted that economic actions are embedded in social and moral orders (Polanyi et al, 1957). "The ends of economics [and] politics,' Edward Fischer writes, should be 'provisioning the good life … for people as they conceive it' (2014: 1). This article excavates how British economic policies, underpinned by tropes of middle-class household thrift, have disabled low-income, urban families from thriving or pursuing the good life for which kin care and decency are fundamental needs.

The second theme is that of middle-class censure of livelihood strategies that don't conform to the bourgeois take on thrift, the measure by which the working class has historically been condemned (Skeggs 1997). The third element is less a theme than the substrate. The material

affordances of the urban context profoundly affect household economies, often structurally compromising their ability to manage. The question here is what a focus on low-income urban households reveals about contemporary contradictions in idioms and practices of thrift at different interlocking scales—kin, community, city, nation, planet—a question whetted by austerity and injunctions to those with scant resources to manage better and cut wasteful habits, both driven by particular norms of thrift.

I explore this question through a four-way dialogue between history and anthropology, first considering how anthropologists and historians have engaged with thrift, each providing complementary insights that, to date, have developed in parallel. I bring these approaches into critical dialogue with my ethnography of a London social housing estate, which I explore in the context of the historical trajectory of low-income urban residents. Thinking with both history and anthropology opens up a space to consider what happens when different forms of thrift coincide and sometimes clash at different scales. Thus, public expenditure cuts can disable kin-centred practices of thrift, including minimising waste: failing material infrastructure impedes the formal recycling practices enjoined upon residents.

Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera's pioneering work on thrift (1990), centred on rural, Panamanian, self-sufficient households, showing that thrift is a guiding principle of careful saving, spending and eschewing waste to ensure reserves against lean periods for the household's long-term continuation. This is juxtaposed with capitalist market 'thrift' where accumulation and future-orientated actions are also found, but geared towards short-term, constant increase. In the starkly different context of London, Daniel Miller reaffirms thrift as central to households as an expression of kin care (Miller, 1998), but with its emphasis on

shopping, his account explains only one of the strategies used to get by. Markus Schlecker's (2005) analysis of thrift in Vietnam, not only juxtaposes traditional household thrift with a socialist regime premised on frugality, but also explores tensions between the two scales: the former incorporating proper ritual celebration that the latter denies. Such conflicts between thrift understood only as frugality and thrift that incorporates thriving, drive the ethnography below where thrift emerges at the nexus of projects of worth, sustainability, welfare, kin, waged labour and material affordances (see Alexander and Sosna, 2022a; 2002b for an extended account of anthropological engagements with thrift).

The more normative cultural-historical accounts (Hulme, 2019; Yates and Davison Hunter, 2011 and Yarrow, 2014) usefully highlight two distinct meanings of thrift. In its pre-modern appearances it was coterminous with its cognate 'thriving', not in the etiolated sense of economic wealth but, as Alison Hulme nicely suggests, more akin to Aristotle's eudaemonia: human flourishing (see also Fischer 2014: 2), a sense that echoes through Thoreau's commitment to simplicity and heightened awareness of being-in-the-world, as well as 20th-century anti-capitalist movements emphasising steady state economies (Daly, 1980) degrowth and ecological sustainability (Kallis et al. 2012). Such thriving chimes with Gudeman and Rivera's idea of household replenishment (1990). There is more to this pre-modern thrift, however. It was a condition rather than virtue or trait, appearing in this form as late as 1679 when John Bunyan uses it to refer to 'a state of being … of blessedness' (Yates and Hunter, 2011: 11). Chaucer uses thrift variously to mean 'luck' (1957: 434, l1249), 'skill' (ibid: 57, l4049), 'suitability' (ibid: 62, l46) and 'prosperity' (ibid: 215, l739). Thrift qua profit appears once, alongside these other meanings (Cady, 2019: 137). Chaucer's 14th century marked the start of the early modern period when an urban, merchant, middle class became established and thrift in the service of profit emerged as a quintessentially bourgeois

virtue (McCloskey, 2006a, 2006b) and has largely occluded—but not replaced—alternative idioms of thrift ever since. Hulme's shorthand distinctions of thrift-as-thriving as different from but giving meaning to thrift-as-frugality (2019) are useful. Joshua Yates and James Davison Hunter (2011: 12-15) further provide a taxonomy of thrift ethics and practices corresponding to 'distinct moral orders' (ibid) and aimed at human flourishing, variously defined, from one age to the next. This foregrounds both that thriftiness at the scale of the household has been reshaped over the last centuries (e.g. from Puritan thrift to consumer thrift), and that thrift, with a view to long-term thriving, is not only a household practice. Indeed, what they call 'collective thriftiness' appears in forms as varied as mutual saving groups, state welfare and, most recently, planetary ecological thrift qua minimising resource extraction and waste production.

My argument here is twofold. Many of these forms of thrift have become enrolled and modified by capitalist logics. Thus ecological thrift has translated into big business via *managing* wastefulness rather than reduction methods that might counter growth;[1] the virtue of frugality has become joined or supplanted by responsible borrowing (the latest manifestation of consumer thrift) as an index of wise household management, good character and citizenship. Indeed, borrowing appears as both right and obligation. These different practices of thrift may materialise at different scales and co-exist, interacting and shaping each other. Failure to comply with these shifting norms can be cast as a moral failure that ricochets from the individual and household to a lack of good citizenship and concern for the planet's survival. This resonates with and extends an emphasis elsewhere in Europe and the US on autonomy, responsibility and self-empowerment for impoverished communities while removing the means to do so via welfare retrenchment (Cruikshank, 1999; Muehlebach,

[1] Vince Packard's diatribe against built-in obsolescence in the 1960s, where producers build constant growth on the back of deliberate wastefulness is equally relevant now.

2012; Fennell, 2015; Koch, 2018). Again, neoliberal policy often draws on an idea of the household to legitimise practice. This is not only a restricted understanding of how many households operate but actively hinders how low-income urban households practice thrift—and, crucially, ignores the fact that states are qualitatively different entities. They can raise taxes and sovereign debt.

Scale is central here as a means of unpacking what thrift means—and does—at different junctures. From the 20th century on ideas and practices of thrift have been deployed in state and urban policies. Citizens were first encouraged to cut waste and save for the nation's salvation during the wars (Cooper, 2008, Gille, 2007, Hulme, 2019), now echoed in contemporary recycling strategies. Keynsian post-war state borrowing was to stimulate the economy *and* provide better standards of living (the OED cites 'welfare' as another translation of thrift-as-thriving). Following Yates and Davison Hunter (2011), we might understand this period as collective thrift, before the virtue of frugality, as simply limiting spending, wandered across scales from household to national economy in the late 1970s, eclipsing the shift in scale (indexed by the recurrent phrase: 'we're all in this together') and therefore how thrift at one scale can have a savage impact on its enactment at another. This is not Keynes' paradox of thrift (1936: 84) where the good of individual saving translates to the bad of a sluggish national economy and unemployment, but where policies of frugality grounded on the idea of the *oikos* and balancing books, can damage household practices of thrift.

In his keynote to the 2009 Conservative conference, Cameron called for 'a new age of austerity' hailing a necessary 'culture of thrift' in public spending (Wheeler 2009) that merged individual with fiscal responsibility. Austerity policies were introduced by

Cameron's newly-elected government in 2010 and vigorously pursued by successive Conservative governments until September 2019, although public spending remained below 2010 levels until the Covid pandemic. This was not the first time the logic of the contained household had been used to justify British fiscal policy. In an abrupt turn from classic economics approaches to market modelling, Margaret Thatcher applied 'the principles of household budgeting ('living within your means') to the management of the national economy' (Samuel, 1992: 17), saying in 1982:

> 'Some say I preach merely the homilies of housekeeping or the parables of the parlour. But I do not repent. Those parables would have saved many a financier from failure and many a country from crisis' (Young, 1989: 5).

Austerity measures have battered vulnerable people across Europe and beyond (Narotzky, 2020). But austerity's longevity in Britain, compounding earlier welfare cuts, alongside the long-term valorisation of home ownership, stigmatisation of social housing and use of household thrift tropes to deride the poor and serve as moral and economic rationale for national economic policy gives the ethnography here a particularity.[2] The portmanteau neologism 'ecology' again draws on the imaginary of self-sufficient household logic to conceptualise a hierarchy of biophysical environments that ultimately encompass the world.

Placing everyday thrifty practices in the context of both histories of thrift, national economic policies and the estate itself foregrounds why a focus on low-income urban households

[2] There are echoes with Germany: in 2008, Angela Merkel said 'The American banks […] should have consulted a Swabian housewife because she could have told them how to deal with money' (*The Economist* 2014).

complicates and extends current analyses of thrift. In so doing, this article echoes recent calls (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014) to focus on how people actually get by and to what end, re-centering social reproduction. What appears is a different kind of thriftiness from more familiar paradigms of the self-sufficient household-as-*oikos* whether the grand estate of Aristotelian economics (2000) or smallholding (Gudeman and Hann, 2015), on the one hand and bourgeois thrift on the other. Moreover, tracing the trope of the spendthrift urban poor back to the 19th century highlights how waged work excluded the urban working class from practising the sort of thrift they were adjured to pursue. This paradox of requirement and exclusion continues to play out.

I explore these themes through an ethnography of a huge social housing estate of dense, high- and low-rise buildings in London: 'the estate'. Initial fieldwork was carried out 2002-2005, with Christine Storey and Chris Smaje, via about 40 interviews and 20 women keeping a diary for a month of everything that entered or left their flats, which we discussed with them weekly. This was supplemented by regular conversations with a local environmental NGO and other residents, helping with shopping, chatting at home or in the local pub. Few men were interested; the ethnography below is therefore largely centred on female-headed households (see Mollona 2009; Koch 2019, Skeggs, 1997, Smith, K. 2012; 2021 for female-centred UK households; Stack, 1974 and Fennell, 2015 for the US). I kept in touch with estate developments. Some fieldwork data presented here were used in a methodological comparison study (Alexander et al. 2009a) and some in an evaluation of urban recycling (Alexander et al, 2009b).

This period was a critical juncture when the Council[3] was trying to improve the estate, which stopped abruptly in 2005. Since 2009 it has been demolished in phases to make way for a private/third sector development. Almost from its inception, the estate's residents were the object of the Council's infrastructural spending cuts and, after 1999, were also cast as recalcitrant citizens for failing to comply with new demands for recycling. As detailed below, the estate's material environment, however, hindered residents from responding to the 'attitude and behaviour change' enjoined upon them: sorting then carrying their recyclates to the appropriate receptacle. In new forms, the same castigation of low-income households for apparently unthrifty, wasteful behaviour continued, eclipsing both alternative understandings of what constitutes careful economy, and to what end, as well as structural obstacles such as dysfunctional infrastructure. Notably, no singular model of actions and beliefs was followed by the estate's residents, some of whom judged each other as fiercely as they were themselves swept into the same category by certain officials and the media.

In what follows, I start with historical contexts to the intersection of scales and practices of thrift on and in the estate, some of which contributed to its eventual dissolution. I then trace how various thrifty measures by central and local government shaped the estate, which might be seen as the object of both spectacular welfare expenditure (modernist 'streets in the sky') and equally performative cuts as it was starved of maintenance to the point that destruction was presented as the best option. I then examine household thrift through different understandings of what constituted decency, or the right way of doing things for my informants and their mechanisms for getting by. This segues into a discussion of how households managed time, labour, money, and materials to achieve, if not a condition of

[3] London is divided into local government authorities (borough councils) responsible for housing and waste management.

blessedness, then norms of kincare. In line with the literature on provisioning in Britain (e.g. Mollona, 2009: 63-78; Smith, 2012, Davey, 2019a; also Narotzky, 2012) the ethnography below suggests a more expansive, elastic idea of households than official definitions, but it also extends this literature by including material repair, sharing and remaking. The final ethnographic section juxtaposes such care in conserving material resources—expressed as care for kin—with a common characterisation of estate residents as bad recyclers or environmentally unaware, despite infrastructural limitations on complying with official demands. Such negative portrayals form an ecological strand of a broader discourse on working-class wastefulness as households and individuals are caught in the mesh of contradictory policies, imperatives, and admonitions concerning responsible thrifty behaviour.

A brief history of thrift and the 'prodigal poor'

While different disciplines emphasise distinct aspects of thrift's intellectual history as indicated above, the gender,[4] class and temporal dimensions of thrift are rarely examined explicitly, beyond the short- and long-term horizons of late capitalism and households respectively (Gudeman, 1987). Nor has there been a close examination of the structural and scalar changes in how thrift-as-frugality has been conceived, fervently enjoined upon others and practised; changes that often curtail the very practices and rationales of thrift being preached to the poor. Here I therefore sketch a history of the ideas and practices of thrift in Britain to provide a genealogy to the multiple, sometimes contradictory norms and practices

[4] While the postwar sociology of gender and working-class respectability (e.g. Mogey, 1956; Goldthorpe et al 1968; Skeggs, 1997) examines changing discourses and practices of consumption and thrift, the latter isn't addressed directly.

of thrift in the ethnography below where earlier censorious misrepresentations of the practices of low-income households still resound.

Thriftiness, as indicated above, has had different dominant meanings from one age to another. Thus, in Europe, we might trace the moves from the relatively self-sufficient peasant smallholding (Gudeman and Hann, 2015),[5] William Cobbett's cottage economy (1822), to bourgeois, urban thrift, national thriftiness in both world wars and thriftiness qua care for the planet's limited resources from the 1970s on, prompted by the oil crisis. These 'moves' only hazard a historical trajectory; many overlap, continue or, as with recycling (Cooper, 2008; Alexander and Reno, 2012) are by turn foregrounded, forgotten and rediscovered. The divergences between smallholders and low-income families in industrial and post-industrial cities show the problems with extrapolating ideas and practices of thrift from one context to another. Cottage economies are based on a gendered division of labour and a range of activities from vegetable plots to baking, brewing, turf cutting, making and mending (Cobbett, 2010; Sturt, 1920) and, crucially, access to common land for the family pig, rivers for fishing, forests for firewood and other commoners' rights (Linebaugh, 1991; see Geremek, 1994 for an overview of European rural and urban poverty over the last millennium).

In his chronicle of 19th-century rural dispossession in England, George Sturt (1920) noted the temporal shifts from rural to industrial domestic economies and the profound effect on thrifty practices. The largely self-sufficient cottager could save towards the occasional significant purchase needed to keep the household going. Factory work initiated a new tempo, not just

[5] The kind of smallholding allowing surplus for reserves is a step up from bare subsistence where thriftiness is neither possible nor valorised (Foster 1965: 296, 307).

for work (Thompson, 1967) but for both income and expenditure as weekly wages were immediately sopped up by buying goods that could no longer be homemade or grown.[6] The new rhythms meant a more hand-to-mouth existence with fewer opportunities to save, not for accumulation, but simply as a buffer against hard times and for the occasional sizeable expenditure (Sturt, 1920: 127-141). The strategies used by urban workers, usually women, to stretch weekly pay across the week, often became the focus of middle-class opprobrium: the weekly and seasonal cycles of pawning and redeeming Sunday or winter clothes (Tebbutt, 1983), for example, were typically decried as heedless and wasteful, much as burial insurance was; the same voice that now censures the financial irresponsibility of those forced to borrow at high interest rates for periodic high-cost items, while lauding prudent borrowing. This is a useful reminder that Mr Micawber's familiar maxim for financial health:

> "Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds] nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery" (Dickens, 1850).

is little help if the *rhythm* of income across the year does not match that of outgoings. Cash flow matters more than end-of-year balance sheets. Moreover, what counts as financial responsibility and for whom has sharply altered. Older estate residents described childhoods punctuated by weekly knocks on the door: the collectors of rent, insurance, contributions for savings clubs, friendly societies and sometimes the tallyman's collections for hire-purchase instalments, known colloquially as 'buying on the never never' (Davey 2019a). In 21st-century Britain, a new financial tempo and discipline is marked by 'the responsible meeting,

[6] The 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act placed a duty on Councils (except in inner London) to make land available.

management and manipulation of ever-greater [payment] obligations' (Langley, 2009: 18), a tempo that is out of synch with irregular, precarious work. While regular cycles of debt and redemption for the poor are not new, the current preference by lenders for on-going debt servicing rather than redemption is a relatively recent innovation.

The bourgeois ethic that privileged thrift qua saving therefore appeared alongside the structural shift of rural dispossession and contraction of the commons that made saving impossible for those whose resources were now restricted to weekly pay. The working classes were thus at once pauperised and castigated for being idle, improvident and vicious, exemplified in the 1834 Report of the Poor Law Commissioners (quoted in Engels, 1845). Echoes appear in the ethnography below as urban residents of dense housing estates are urged to recycle—and rebuked for failing, when their material environment and the reduced service they receive is a severe constraint.

The ethics or virtue complexes of which thrift is sometimes part, reinforce class distinctions. The mediaeval aristocratic virtues of honour and generous largesse were rooted in the classical, public virtues along with courage and justice (Casey, 1991; McCloskey, 2006) while the labouring poor had to make do with the Christian virtues of submission to their lot via faith, humility, and 'the redeeming effects of suffering … in the life to come' (Freedman, 1999: 230). Otherwise, the peasant is reduced to a figure that exemplifies Christ-like poverty (ibid). The rise of the urban middle class and the bourgeois mode of thrift composed of self-discipline, hard work, self-denial, accumulation and reinvestment was at odds with first, the aristocratic virtues (nominally inimical to thrift),[7] second, peasant practices of making do

[7] A critique of lazy aristocrats was partnered with a critique of working-class profligacy in the rise of Swedish middle-class thriftiness (Lofgren and Frykman, 1987).

from a variety of resources and, third, the very urban workers who fuelled bourgeois accumulation but who appear as the dehumanised object of profound moral, social and economic fear. Their seeming lack of thrift, index of irrationality (Ketabgian, 2010), joining other vilifications that centre on absence: '[w]orkers were excoriated as uncivilised heathen, signifying only a sociocultural lack: '*ir*religion, *in*temperance, *im*providence' [and] *im*morality' (Stedman Jones, 1974: 463, italics in original).

Harriet Martineau, rightly celebrated for her insistence on connecting domestic and political economy, nonetheless gave voice to a horrified, middle-class vision of a profligate working class addicted to ephemeral indulgence and instant satisfaction, linking the same fast immediacy of 'modern industrial production with acts of impulsive and improvident consumption' of luxury goods (Ketabgian, 2010: 153). The proposed corrective was in control and deferral, treating 'capitalist self-denial as gratifying in its own right' (ibid: 154). Martineau was not alone in celebrating the moral and economic benefits of self-discipline, and censuring what were cast as 'irrational, incomprehensible and anti-economic actions' (ibid: 151), seen through a neoclassical economic lens (ibid). The trope of low-income workers being unable to defer gratification is part of a broader rhetorical trope that infantilises colonised peoples and the working class by portraying them as lacking discipline in countless ways (Alexander and Sosna, 2022a; Wilk 2022).

Alongside the pathologisation of the working class,[8] the hectoring tomes of Samuel Smiles, author of *Self Help* (1859) and *Thrift* (1875), best exemplify the spirit of exhortation to the working classes to buck up, improve themselves and recognise that they 'themselves (are) to

[8] Gareth Stedman Jones (1974) summarises the 'slum life literature' that followed Charles Booth's observation of the working classes' 'strict rules of propriety'.

blame for what they suffer' (1875:154). However, Smiles only made explicit in a Victorian idiom a view that can be traced back to the Henrician English Poor Laws (1536) that castigated the physically able but poor as undeserving because they were lazy and improvident (Alexander, 2009; Cunningham & Innes, 1998; Polanyi, 2001).[9] Stedman Jones (1974) not only highlights the different moral and economic norms for the 19th-century working and middle classes, but that the former's 'thrifty' practices, such as drawing on kin labour, were often hidden from view and that in order to benefit from middle-class philanthropy, claimants had to demonstrate signs of thrift that were recognisable to donors to be considered deserving, much as 20th- and 21st-century welfare has always depended on the performance of middle-class norms of deservingness (Skeggs, 1997; Smith, 2021: 38; Koch, 2019). Since the 1980s, such deservingness has been partly metricised through credit scores, an 'institutionalized measure of moral worth' (Dudley, 2000: 63).

In sum, the urban households in the ethnography below differ from both rural and middle-class households and their models of thrift. Nonetheless, media excoriations of 'the feckless poor' (Tyler, 2015) still often draw on the discourse of such middle-class thrift as an index of moral and economic rectitude, failing to recognise structural and material impediments as well as what counts as a respectable household and the means of achieving this. Finally, much as 'the working class' is all too often taken as a singularity, by both defenders or accusers, I acknowledge the differences in people's approaches to getting by without using the terminology of a failed or fractured class consciousness. The next section traces the estate's history, focusing on how different ideas of thrift at different scales, shaped both residents' material environment and demands placed upon them.

[9] Margaret Thatcher frequently, approvingly quoted Smiles (Samuel, 1992:11).

The Estate

This colossal estate, housing almost 10,000 residents in concrete-panel blocks of flats, was built between 1967 and 1977 and financed by borrowing, like much postwar council housing (Beckett, 2016). Such state indebtedness and expenditure was aimed at providing a better living environment than London's insanitary, crowded and often bomb-damaged slums. Initially hailed as the epitome of the modern, ideal way to live, the estate rapidly decayed through lack of maintenance, becoming a byword for inner-city deprivation. By the time I started fieldwork there had been a furore over Channel 4 using the estate for its ident, a video clip that was 'enhanced' by the addition of flapping laundry, artfully-scattered litter and an abandoned shopping trolley in a long, empty corridor (Murray, 2012).

Edie, a 60-year old, leading light of local politics complained in the pub where we regularly met, that anything negative that happened in the area was always ascribed to the estate, which she insisted was 'just another community'. Her point was reinforced by the Task Force of architects, police, teachers and NGOs that had been set up to help tackle problems on the estate: 'If you look at the statistics,' the young project manager noted, 'crime levels aren't much worse than other areas, but when something *does* happen, it can be something big that makes the news and distorts what things are normally like'. A 2015 report (Social Action, 2015) made the point more forcefully with its graphics of the estate and surrounding areas' 2010 indices of multiple deprivation. Not only did the estate appear safer than neighbouring districts, the highest scoring index of deprivation was in barriers to housing and services. The media's fascinated hysteria over the supposed deviance of estate residents echoes Martineau's phobic caricature and was reinforced by the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act which, as Insa Koch explains, re-evaluated access to social housing from marking 'a

citizen's worthiness' to 'a mark of dismal inadequacy' (2019: 46). The initial relocations took place just before the 1977 Housing Act.

Many early residents were thrilled with what they described as large, well-appointed flats. One of the first to move in from nearby Bermondsey (Ashton, 1972), a dockland area that was savagely shelled during the war, Doreen said, 'It was like going to the Ritz, dear. Huge windows and mirrors everywhere. So much space! And an indoor bathroom. We couldn't believe our luck'. At the start, residents were often moved street by street, each one allocated to a corridor, keeping the familiar community going, and therefore a very different experience from that described by Michael Young and Peter Willmott where relocated East End residents complained of a lack of neighbourliness (1957: 119; see also Mogey, 1956: 85). In the 1960s and 1970s, Edie explained, most of the girls left school at 16 and went to work at the Peek Freans biscuit factory in Bermondsey, staying at home until they were married and then often moving to another flat on the estate. Gillian Evans' ethnography of white, working-class Bermondsey confirms its continuing tight-knit community, as one of her informants commented, 'Bermondsey's like Alabama – everyone is related to everyone else' (2006: 19).

The population changed markedly with new incomers, a process that accelerated in the 1980s when the Right to Buy Act (1980) allowed Council tenants to buy their apartments at a discounted market price, a scheme that continues. The Act reframed both responsible, thrifty behaviour and thriving to mean borrowing to secure the 'dignity' of home ownership. Although the idea had been around since the 1930s, first mooted by a Labour government, it took off under the Conservative government then in power, aimed at reducing the public cost of state-owned and managed housing. Numbers peaked under the subsequent New Labour

government. Perhaps unexpectedly, given the government's emphasis on prudent household saving, many who had no collateral could take out mortgages on the strength of the discount. Arguably, Right to Buy marked the move from the virtue of thrifty saving to normalising borrowing as thrifty good sense—which climaxed with the sale of subprime mortgages and the 2008 financial crash. Encouraging tenants to buy their homes was not accompanied by building more public housing; in 2020 over a million homes are needed to provide everyone with a decent home to live in (BBC, 2020). The cost of subsidising private rentals for welfare recipients outweighs the cost of council housing. By any reckoning, public money has not been saved.

New owners rapidly found that the dignity of ownership extended not only to liability for their own apartment, but to a share of their building's common areas (e.g. walls, roofs, stairwells), which had suffered from long-term under-investment and maintenance, arguably central to any thrifty endeavour (cf. Verdery, 2003 for 'post-socialist' examples). Interest rates escalated during the late 1980s and early 1990s, partly as a result of a housing bubble, partly from short-lived monetarist policies that also sharply increased unemployment, rendering many new homeowners vulnerable to dispossession after repayment defaults. Meanwhile house prices slumped between 1988 and 2002; those who found themselves with negative equity were disproportionately on lower incomes, younger and had bought between 1988-1991 (Dorling and Cornford, 1995). In response, some had to take out more loans, some sold up and others moved to cheaper housing, renting out their flat. In some instances, flats were illegally subdivided into bedsits, each room with a lockable door, increasing churn and, some residents observed, reducing the earlier close community.

By 2001, the Council planned to transfer the large remainder of the estate that it still owned and managed to an independent social housing organisation but was dumbfounded to find that the tenants' vote on the transfer produced an overwhelming (73%) refusal. Edie's friend in the pub chipped in that she had voted no as 'my friend was regenerated and she didn't like it at all, so I said no to that happening here'. Edie added tartly that it was the Council's responsibility to look after the people who had been relocated from Bermondsey and that privatisation was selling residents short. The Council was now faced with having to bring the estate up to scratch. Edie, as well as some local community NGOs, explained that several Single Regeneration Budgets (SRBs)[10] had been awarded but mysteriously had never been converted into improved living standards. Edie did not stint on her accusations of corruption amongst local officials and councillors, claiming they had converted the SRBs straight into their bank accounts.

During my fieldwork there were plans to improve the estate. Architects were commissioned, tenants, including Edie, consulted, plans drawn up and one corner renovated. This was short lived. In 2005, the Council announced that the estate's largely concrete-panel construction was a safety hazard in case of gas explosions. Other irredeemable material shortcomings were also cited: the heating system, untraceable leaks, and flat roofs (Beckett, 2016). The only responsible thing to do therefore was to evacuate residents and hand the estate over to private or third sector developers, creating twice as many, but smaller flats. At least half would be sold to finance the new development. Residents who rented from the Council were told they could return once building was complete, but that the flats would be smaller and

[10] Established by Blair's Labour government, the SRB scheme ran 1994-2004 to address multifaceted urban deprivation through 'partnership working' with residents, Councils, private and third sector groups. It included a mandate to improve both environment and infrastructure.

rents 80%[11] of market value. Approximately two miles from the City of London the estate is 'prime' land commanding high market values. Despite vehement protests, the plan was implemented in phases from 2009. Tenants, now called 'decants', were moved elsewhere, their homes termed 'voids'. As of 2020, only 34% of previous tenants have returned. Residents who had bought their flats, were served Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) which many claimed were significantly below the market value, forcing them to move a considerable distance for affordable housing and making a mockery of the discourse of the dignity and self-reliance that would supposedly accompany becoming an owner occupier.

This short account of the estate's troubled history has necessarily skimmed details (see Coleman, 1985; Lees, 2014; Beckett, 2016 for longer versions). Nonetheless, it shows that whereas the estate's initial construction drew on Corbusier's modernist spirit, if not the quality of his materials and design, almost from the outset, estates such as this were targets of government cost reductions and stigmatisation (cf Mogey 1956). Further, it indicates the difficulties in considering thrift in such a context, where a household's material infrastructure, let alone the added affective dimensions of home (Alexander et al, 2018), are in the care of a landlord who either fails to maintain buildings to acceptable standards (see Koch, 2018) or chooses evacuation, demolition and rebuild over maintenance. Informally, local community NGOs as well as some Council officials with oversight of the Borough's housing, observed that while hardly a thrifty option in terms of an economic balance sheet, new build has more political value than the 'invisible' expense of maintaining infrastructure, a view with which Edie was in vociferous agreement, although some tenants equally fervently believed that the estate urgently needed rebuilding to better standards. One irony is

[11] Following an outcry, the percentage was reduced but returning to the estate is still impossible for many former council tenants.

that the UK campaign for decent homes, launched by Tony Blair's government to improve living standards, has often been used to justify new build rather than maintenance, fuelling the current phase of demolition-and-rebuild gentrification (Wilde, 2020; Lees, 2014; Slater 2008).

Decency and respectability

The brief history of thrift above was a preliminary foray into its class dimensions over time. Here I explore ethnographically the complications of managing on a limited budget to maintain at least a public face of decency. Institutional admonishments to have a planetary conscience or indeed accounts of the rising popularity of secondhand circuits of exchange such as charity shops, car boot sales, or ebay (e.g. Tranberg Hansen and le Zotte, 2019) typically eclipse the sharp class difference between conspicuous thriftiness as a fashionable trend and careful frugality as the only means of managing on a low income when poverty is a recent memory and painfully near to hand. Thus, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz's observation that the difference between a twitch and a blink hinges on the action's context (1973: 6), we might say that darning a sock can be read very differently if the sock in question was initially a good quality wool sock able to bear several darnings or one that rapidly disintegrates; whether the action is a statement of skill or eco-commitment—increasingly, 'visible' darns are an eco-fashion statement (Noguchi, 2019) irrespective of need, enacting an aesthetic of thrift—or one of shame, denoting poverty, or simply a habit.[12]

[12] Likewise, the complex responses to secondhand clothing in southern Italy emerge from the confluence of social pressure to wear designer clothing, poverty, and charity's negative associations (Pipyrou, 2014).

Two women on the estate, quite different in character, dominated local politics, residents tending to side with one or the other. They also exemplified different approaches to thrift and decency. Edie, introduced above, was joyfully raucous and frequently obscene. She chain-smoked and had a fondness for leopardskin patterned clothes that she had triumphantly unearthed in local charity shops. Passionately engaged with both local politics and the Labour Party, she was an enthusiastic and respected advocate for estate residents' welfare.

I first bonded with Edie in the local pub, partly because I was buying the drinks but also because I had just bought a large quantity of cheap offcuts of ham from a nearby supermarket, which I offered to split with her. 'That'll do nicely for my Mikey's tea,' she said, scooping the ham, now carefully wrapped in a handkerchief, into her handbag. The ham cemented our friendship; she found a way of mentioning it most of the times we met up. Her rival was quite different. Neatly dressed, hair carefully permed and never leaving her flat without 'putting her face on', Maureen was equally invested in the estate and furious about media calumnies but supported regeneration via demolition and rebuild believing the estate was past its sell-by date.

Not only did the two women present themselves very differently in terms of appearance and comportment, but Maureen carefully pointed out that she only bought her food from Marks and Spencer, a fairly upmarket food store, pre-prepared if possible, because she knew it was 'good quality'. Not for her ham offcuts slid under a table in the gloom of a pub. That food is richly symbolic is hardly news, but perhaps needs re-stating for its role marking out the slippery ascent from poverty to respectability and noting that government-sponsored injunctions not to waste food might clash with these other imperatives, particularly marking ritual occasions (Alexander et al., 2012).

Provisioning for children elicited a particular set of views of what was appropriate or decent. Maureen had started a small exchange system for children's toys, encouraging mothers to bring toys their children had grown out of and swap them for new ones. A young woman had also started her own with her friends. For the younger group, swapping toys became a social occasion but most also tried to save up to splash out on at least one big, new toy for each of their children each year. The increasing cost of these as the children hankered after electronic games worried the mothers, anxious to do the best for their children lest they be mocked by friends. Clothes were a different matter. Discussing a couple of local charity shops, the same young women all said emphatically that they would never dress their children in second-hand clothes. One added slowly that if she was really stuck for money and needed something she might think about it for herself, 'but never for my kids. I get the best I can for them.' Having to wear second-hand clothes or 'hand-me-downs' from older siblings and cousins, reminded her of her own childhood and being acutely aware of how little money there had been to keep the family going. Again, while some siblings might swap clothes, there was often a boundary drawn around immediate family—sometimes extending to close friends—beyond which clothes were not exchanged for reasons varying from disgust at an unhygienic practice to social embarrassment. Edie's delight in charity shops was not widely shared.[13] But the social gatherings, finding toys or indeed saving enough to buy something new for a child, all afforded pleasure far beyond the instrumental value of saving money. While toys and clothes may seem a world away from burials, they arguably belong to the same register of proper provision, highlight the fragility of maintaining decency and, moreover, reduce waste and save money.

[13] There were three pawnshops near the estate. None of my informants used them, but they did a lively trade.

Maureen also liked to remind people that she and her (rarely seen) husband had bought their flat under the Right to Buy scheme and were therefore owner occupiers, suggesting that owning was a social notch above renting from the Council. Edie, when asked if she'd considered buying her flat, pointed out that the right *she* wanted, was the right to rent from the Council, explicitly invoking the postwar social welfare contract on which the estate was literally and politically founded (Alexander et al. 2018). Owning, in Maureen's eyes, not only afforded social distinction but also indicated the moralised ability to save—and borrow. She had paid a deposit from her savings and borrowed the rest as a mortgage. At a time when mortgage repayments were cheaper than renting—until interest rates shot up to nearly 15% in 1989—the thriftiness of buying usually depended on a stable income that was enough to save and borrow on. The opportunity for such thriftiness was not open to those whose income was both insecure and low, unless they could take advantage of the Right to Buy discount.[14] The ability to be thrifty in terms of saving, or indeed borrowing for a longer-term investment, is thus not for the indigent.[15]

The differences between Maureen and Edie underline some of the contradictions inherent in ideas, idioms, practices of thrift. Edie may have embodied an unbounded extravagance of manner at odds with the attributes associated with thriftiness but practised a careful frugality, making it into an adventure. Maureen's apparently more self-disciplined habitus nonetheless

[14] 'The incomes of RTB purchasers were below average; most were from lower middle-class or skilled working-class backgrounds' (Cole et al, 2015: 1).

[15] Robert Tressell (2012) and Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) illustrate the proportionately higher living costs for the financially insecure (see Miller 1998 for the same view from the perspective of wealthy Londoners: buying good-quality items is seen as thrifty).

exemplified the shift from valuing the skills of household frugality, and the relationships that enabled this, to valuing increased status through conspicuous consumption (Skeggs, 2011: 504). Pre-prepared, expensive food is more wasteful in terms of cost and packaging, but speaks to a different moralised schema of class ascent. Home ownership promised stability, a key characteristic of the condition of thrift, and dignity in a re-moralised Britain (Davey, 2019b) but was also founded on speculation that was undermined by government policies leaving many homebuyers vulnerable to eviction, even before CPOs decimated their investment. Meanwhile, for many, reliance on kin-based networks continued as the main resource for managing, at once utilitarian and moral.

Networks and shared labour – or the axiom of amity

Through a focus on dynamic household practices, this section highlights how ideas of thrift based on households as coterminous with dwellings, long the Census definition, conflicted with residents' thrifty practices (Mollona, 2009: 63-78). Our initial survey exposed some odd results. Mary, a slim widow in her mid 50s had lived alone in a two-bedroom flat since 1993. She spent a huge amount on food, vastly in excess of either one person's capacity for consumption or her income: a small pension and a part-time cleaning job. In startling contrast, Lydia, a young woman who lived in a nearby one-bedroom flat with her baby and toddler, appeared to be either on a starvation diet or one that comprised only the occasional chocolate bar, snack or pizza, all 'treats' and no provisions in Miller's schema of shopping (1998), although such treats were often just to save time. It rapidly transpired that the widow was not gluttonous, nor the little family malnourished; Mary was Lydia's mother, shopping and cooking on her behalf while Lydia, who received welfare benefits, looked after her children. There were no affordable crèches in the area and it was hard to find a job that paid

enough to be worthwhile after the costs of childcare. This, however, was only a small part of the large and complex household that Mary headed up.

Mary also had two sons, one of whom, Mark, rented a room on the estate, and had two children who lived with their mother, with whom he had broken up. His children occasionally visited and were usually brought round to Mary's flat to join whatever meal was being served. On the strength of her job, Mary had borrowed money to pay Mark's deposit. Mark and his brother, who also lived nearby though not on the estate, both brought their laundry to Mary who ran daily loads in her washing machine. Her sons had been intermittently in prison for petty theft and now sporadically worked as building labourers or helped in East Street Market, known locally as 'The Lane', which ran along one of the estate's boundaries. Occasionally, they gave Mary some money towards buying food, although they preferred to contribute to a celebratory blowout rather than the regular contributions that were, she muttered, more use. Nonetheless, Mary was not averse to feasting when the occasion called for it. 'Say what you like,' she said [I hadn't said anything], 'but when my boys come out the nick, I always have a good spread on the table for them.' Such spreads necessitated weeks of careful scrimping to save up enough money to buy the food and drink her sons were partial to. A recurrent theme was how to celebrate ritual occasions properly (see Stedman Jones, 1974: 473). Christmas warranted the largest outlay and, by the same token, the most careful saving, sometimes via 'Christmas Clubs', that offered no interest but, as Mary said, made it easier to save up across the year. Careful as Mary was, she also commented that she often simply lacked the time to find the best value buys in the high street and market, which entailed trailing from shop to shop comparing prices. Time invested in childcare and cooking was traded for time that might have saved money: a different calculus from that suggested by Miller's informants (1998).

Mary's other daughter, Rhianna, had a temporary job and two children: a school-age son and 3-year old daughter. Mary therefore looked after Rhianna's daughter and her son after school, often with Lydia's children as well, when Lydia had to be away from home. Lydia and Rhianna gave Mary money weekly to buy food that she cooked and either ate with her children and grandchildren or gave to her children to reheat at home. Occasionally, Mary co-ordinated other child-minding arrangements when she was busy, such as collecting Rhianna's children for Lydia to look after.

Sharing labour and money was common across the estate when children lived nearby, especially with female-headed households. Mary was effectively the family's accountant working out the complex permutations of monetised and unmonetised labour and exchanges necessary to keep the family going. Contributions varied from one child to another and over the course of the year, but there was no sense that cash acted as an equivalence for non-monetised labour or other resources. This is a reminder that an Aristotelian anathematization of money and markets and valorisation of a non-monetised domestic realm of mutual aid is certainly common (Block and Parry, 1987) and underpins a bourgeois separation of public and private spheres but is not universal. Thus, Chris Gregory (2014) describes how householding, in Karl Polanyi's (2001) taxonomy of economic modes, initially appeared as an abstraction of the oikos, before being recast as just another form of redistribution. Although grounded on distinct kinship norms Gregory's ethnography (ibid) in middle India shows that households can straddle monetised and non-monetised economic spheres, pooling and redistributing money. Similarly, in rural Turkey I found a similar sense that money was just another resource to be shared (Alexander, 2002: 164, 172-3).

Quite apart from the economic sense it made to share labour, income and costs in this way, there was also a moral balance sheet over which Mary presided. ‘At the end of the day,’ she liked to say, ‘it’s family innit, you’ve got to look after family, even if they drive you up the wall sometimes’, neatly paraphrasing Fortes’ axiom of amity: ‘a general principle of kinship morality that is rooted in the familial domain and is assumed everywhere to be axiomatically binding. This is the rule of prescriptive altruism’ (1969: 231-232).

The household in this case is neither wholly defined by co-residence nor ‘family’ but as ‘activities and relationships’ (Wilk and Netting, 1992, see also Yanagisako, 1979) that draw together a series of overlapping kin-based units, partly independent and partly pooling resources to address the complex logistics that low income presents. Reliance on such kin and friendship networks for sharing resources is widespread (see Evans, 2006 and Koch, 2019; Fitchen, 1995; and Gullestad, 1985 for England, rural US and Norway; Stack, 1974 and Fennell, 2015 for US low-income black urban households). Although the details of Mary’s extended household are specific, the principle of closely-linked kin units, was common across the estate, although exchanges and sharing were puzzled over.

Linda was Mary’s neighbour and friend, had worked most of her life as a secretary, was recently divorced, and had taken early retirement because of ill health. ‘It don’t seem right,’ she said, describing how she had always helped her daughters financially when they left home and started families of their own. But then the tables had turned when Linda’s mobility became impaired; one of her daughters now had a well-paid job and was paying Linda’s rent. ‘She’s a good girl, but it don’t seem right having your girls giving you money.’ Again, Mary sometimes had to mediate in squabbles between Rhianna and Lydia when prescriptive

altruism rubbed against a sense of injustice: too much borrowing of clothes, childcare being taken for granted, or the tedium of office work being underappreciated.

This raises several questions as to how we think through thrift, the kind of resources needed, when and how it operates and when it is inappropriate. Both Mary's and Linda's household management worked through a dynamic understanding of what a household was, far removed from the English census definition that acknowledges that non-kin may make a household but within a single dwelling, echoing the distinction between the nuclear family, typically assumed in law, and the 'unclear family' produced by multiple relationships and separations (Simpson, 1977). The kind of forced gentrification via forced evacuation and destruction that happened on the estate, also destroys this kind of domestic economy which relies on proximity.

Recycling for the nation: provision or persuasion

As the previous two sections suggest, from the estate residents' perspective, minimising wastefulness was simply part of a broader repertoire of activities to care for kin properly that combined saving money and eschewing waste. More than this, however, waste avoidance was rarely thought of as such, shading at one end into enjoyable gossip or the triumph of the find and at the other hedged about with the anxieties of showing inadequate care and propriety. But shifting scale to how waste avoidance is viewed and practised by local and central authorities, as well as enjoined upon citizens, shows how formalised recycling has both been plucked from its broader rationale of preserving resources and has little connection with informal practices that do just that.

Recycling thus provides an illuminating perspective onto the conjunction of different scales of thrifty practices and assumptions, and the institutional hollowing-out of planetary care. The 1970's energy crisis gave rise to ecological movements and economics driven by a sense of the world as a shared oikos whose sustainability was threatened by excess extraction and waste (Alexander and Reno, 2012: 16). In response, the EU's waste strategy 'aims to help Europe become a recycling society that seeks to avoid waste and uses waste as a resource' (EU, 2005), a thrifty aim. This extends the EU's 1999 Waste Directive that issued targets to its member countries for reducing biodegradable waste sent to landfill by 50% by 2020 of each country's 1997 levels. This hit Britain, traditionally reliant on landfill, hard. Britain's government responded by passing the targets, how to meet them—[16] and financial penalties for failures—down to Councils. Recycling plus disposal methods such as incineration or anaerobic digestion, have been the main instruments for reducing landfilling. Households were faced with new demands to sort their rubbish into different materials and then store it until collected, or take it to a collection point. Dense housing was rapidly linked to low recycling rates, narrowly understood as correctly sorted material streams, collected outside the home. But this raises questions about how thrifty this process actually is and how well these expectations of citizens fitted with high-rise, post-war housing estates. The waste chutes at the end of each corridor have long been notorious across this and similar estates for regularly being blocked.

There is a commonly-agreed hierarchy of preferentially-ranked practices for dealing with waste according to the amount of energy and material required and hence the efficiency—or thriftiness—of the process. Landfill is the least attractive option, producing methane that is

[16] Councils were given choice over how they met targets, but the government made available £1.4billion for Councils choosing commercial contractors (NAO, 2014).

rarely convertible to usable energy. Incineration and anaerobic digestion may recover some energy but again address waste disposal rather than its creation. Recycling—dismantling an object to re-use its parts—is also a low-ranked process requiring energy, moving up to repair, then re-use before the best options of reducing or producing no waste at all.

The conundrum for Councils tasked with reducing landfilled waste is that the least effective methods are the easiest to quantify because they are the most visible. Repairing, or re-using an item (mending, exchanging or repurposing clothes or reusing empty containers) is rarely detectable outside the home. There is another distinction between the apparently seamless climb from one option to another. The productive consumption of re-using, repairing, sharing or passing on items to extend their use within and between households, are straightforward, thrifty household practices: they obviate or reduce expenditure, although may require time and labour. Putting out recyclates that cannot be absorbed into the extended household for external collection, requires space and time to sort and store materials. But there is no immediate benefit to the household economy.

Household recycling rates have long been lowest in deprived urban areas (BBC, 2019). Notably, however, the assumption in much of the grey and white literature on how to improve recycling rates, is that low returns means that people in these areas are unwilling, indifferent or unaware of the reasons for recycling (Barr, 2007). Consequently, considerable effort is spent on communicating the importance of recycling to such residents (WRAP, 2013), alongside experiments as to whether punishment (e.g. fines) or reward (e.g. shopping tokens) is the best technique to ensure participation (Thøgersen, 2003).[17] We found some

[17] A recent report (WRAP, 2018), acknowledges the problems of poor infrastructure, different levels of provision and the time required by local staff to achieve successful responses.

(although emphatically not all) local officials were scathing about residents' civic commitment, care for public spaces and willingness to recycle. One observed that 'these people are like animals' in how they dealt with their rubbish, chanting the items he had seen stuffed down the chute: 'nicked bikes, a microwave, duvets, cats, broken glass…'. Another gleefully repeated the urban myth of babies being found in the containers into which the chutes delivered rubbish, noting that although flats had been provided with plastic boxes for separating recyclates, these had either been thrown outside or used for storing toys or laundry. This, apparently, was caused by a failure of comprehension.

Such comments ignore the physical constraints on recycling in such areas, let alone residents' views. Long corridors with small cupboards ran the length of the estate's larger housing blocks. There was no other external space to store recyclates, so space had to be found inside. Marisa spelled out the problems:

> 'Inside my flat I just don't have room for all these recycling bins we're supposed to put next to the ordinary bin. So, one idea they had was to give us see-through plastic bags! I came home to find these bags shoved through my letterbox. I was furious. I do child care and these bags are really dangerous. So, where are we supposed to put stuff? I'm not keeping glass or tins in my flat with the kids around.'

She gestured to the corridor cupboards, many of which had doors hanging off their hinges or were doorless.

> 'I'm not going to put stuff in there with no lock or no door at all! If you put glass out in the recycling box, the kids smash it on their way home from school all over

the corridor or throw other stuff around. My neighbour had one lot of card and paper set alight.'

Marisa's neighbours had other difficulties in trying to get round the problem of storing recyclates. Stan was in his late 70s and waiting for a hip operation. He had lived alone on the twentieth-floor of a high-rise block since his wife had died two years previously, in a flat they had shared since the estate was first built. He took great pride in the estate, often slowly walking round checking that 'things were in order' as he liked to say, picking up litter, reporting on broken benches or windows in the hope of getting them mended. Stan described the early years as a time when residents taught incomers from overseas 'how we deal with rubbish here,' noting that he had intervened to stop waste being thrown out of windows but that people had quickly stopped when he explained local ways of doing things.

For Stan, and many others, the biggest problem was the frequently malfunctioning lift that made 'life in the skies', as he and his wife had once called their new life, a nightmare. Laboriously hobbling down the stairs with a bag of recyclates for the bring banks[18] that had been set up outside, he was upset and angry to find not only that they had been fire bombed but that the Council's response was just to tape them over. It was a lesson learned, he said sternly. But it was also a shock to someone who tried to do the right thing, Stan's phrase for recycling, although like many he was hazy on why he was being asked to recycle.

Lift failure featured largely in residents' complaints. A young mother of a toddler and baby who also lived in a high rise, explained how she had twice taken her recycling down many flights of stairs with a pushchair and small child in tow, only to find, like Stan on the second

[18] Large fixed containers for the public to deposit dry recyclates in.

occasion that the Bring Bank was out of order. It was not, she said firmly, something she was likely to try again in a hurry. Later that year, the residents' association, led by Edie, gathered with banners outside the town hall protesting about lift failure.

The Council's website cites its aim to be 'socially, economically, ethically and environmentally sustainable' but is faced with finding a waste strategy to fit startlingly different areas: broad streets of Georgian villas abut Victorian terraces and dense housing estates. The typical response is to provide households with large containers for recyclables and collect them via kerbside or 'doorstep' collections but the estate's physical layout meant that residents were not offered the doorstep collection service offered to nearby households with front gardens, ground-level access and more space generally. The emphasis continues to be on education and communication rather than provision. A government-sponsored report on waste for proposed high-rise flats in London noted the need for adequate internal space as well as: 'A system that encourages a sense of personal responsibility for correct segregation of waste and use of waste management service/infrastructure. This could include linking use of service to individual, household or business via technology (e.g. smart bins) and/or monitoring (via CCTV and caretaking staff)' (Eunomia, 2018: 10). Existing housing is not easily retrofitted to increase internal space, but responsibility through 'clear user instruction' and 'signage' along with enforcement and smart technology is a preferred way of achieving this kind of thriftiness than, for example, repairing broken corridor cupboards or lifts or providing an effective collection service.

Despite the constraints and contrary to assumptions that low recycling indicates ignorance of requirements, or just low moral fibre, most of our informants expressed a wish to recycle if they could. Luisa, who had recently moved with her small daughter from Colombia to the

UK, was extremely anxious to comply with what she saw as orders from ‘the Council’ but also, like her friends, talked about recycling as something to do ‘for my country’. Ideas that formal recyclates collection might be related to global or any ecological concern, rarely appeared. There was also the occasional robust dismissal of the Council’s recycling efforts as a cover up for sending the carefully-sorted waste to landfill or China.

Other actions of finding and saving oddments or other items that might be put to future use, were not always done primarily to be thrifty but responded to quite different imperatives and temporalities. Both men and women collected items or bits and pieces, often either for children when they grew older or for grandchildren who sometimes did not yet exist. These imagined future kin had a rich material prefiguration via the clothes and toys piled in drawers, or yet-to-be-made go karts or doll houses that were eagerly discussed via the fragments of wood, wheels and other bits and bobs that had been found and squirreled away. In these narratives, it sometimes took a while to realise that the recipient had only been mentally conceived. But what was also apparent was the self-making of the narrator as a future grandparent or parent, skilled in crafting and providing for their family, woven through with the delight and satisfaction of finding, making and mending and keeping things going. Such actions and imaginings cannot simply be ascribed to an instrumental frugality but skein together the positive affects of thriving with their means. Inevitably, for flat dwellers, the problem was where to store the screws, wooden fragments, jars, wheels, glue, tools and so forth which were consequently scattered across friends’ attics, cellars, cupboards, allotment sheds and so on as limbo spaces where things were regularly forgotten and joyously rediscovered. Sometimes these kinds of practices simply became hoarding; most flats had a small space where things were thrown to be sorted later. Occasionally a flat

would be drowning in stuff making it hard even to find somewhere to sit without carefully moving a pile of oddments.

There was one more unexpected category of holding onto things, which again did not fit into straightforward frugality. Three flats had white goods (two washing machines and a freezer) that had been kept after they had broken and were beyond repair. The freezer was used as a cupboard, but this was not the main reason for keeping it. In all three cases, the owners associated them with parents who had used them and since died. Olivia had covered her broken twin tub with a red cloth and put a potted plant on it, speaking movingly of the memories it evoked of her mother bending over it, stuffing it with laundry or hauling out a wet load to be hung up and dried on the balcony. 'I can still see her when I walk past it. I haven't the heart to get rid of it, even though I can afford a new one.' An unthrifty action perhaps in terms of space and time—she had to walk down to the local launderette every week carrying her washing as she had no room to install a functioning washing machine—but a reminder that spirits can inhabit even the most anonymous of machines. Both monetary and material thrift, sometimes even hoarding after a family death, were woven through with reliance on kin and the material anticipation, or recall, of future and past kin.

Conclusion

Tracking thrift over time and across scales shows how a model of thrift privileging self-sufficiency has fuelled derogatory discourses about the urban poor as undisciplined and wasteful since the early 19th century. Changes in the meaning of thrift in British public discourse partly follow the shifting parameters of what is deemed to constitute responsible individual behaviour and good citizenship. Thus the thrifty virtue of saving and avoiding debt and wastefulness, became joined, sometimes supplanted by an emphasis on prudent

consumer borrowing to provide a good family home, from buying something on the never never to obtaining a mortgage and supposedly joining a democracy defined by property ownership. Thrift's malleability and potency therefore play a key role in capitalism's persuasions to spend more.

This is where Yates and Davison Hunter's (2011) taxonomy of thrift ethics and practices appears ethnographically as the changing form, scalar elision and co-existence of different kinds of thrift over time, some of which hobble thrift at another scale. Thus the estate's history manifests the move from a collective sense of thrift based on state borrowing for improved welfare to public expenditure cuts that are morally and economically underpinned by an oikos model of thrift. Thrifty borrowing switched from something performed by the state *for* its citizens to a practice enjoined *upon* citizens for their own welfare (see Fennell 2015 for 'post-welfare re-education'). It is worth re-emphasising, however, that the estate also suffered from poor design and construction materials showing little evidence of the long-term careful economy characterising household management (Gudeman and Rivera 1990).

The 1970s saw an abrupt gear change when middle-class thrift ceased to merely shape belittling discourse but migrated across scales and began to be operationalised, underscoring national policy, stigmatising social housing, valorising borrowing and ownership, and cutting 'wasteful' public expenditure. In the same decade this trope was also mobilised to frame concern for planetary sustainability as the common oikos. Over the next two decades, paralleling the moralised economic move from public to private responsibility, post-war technocratic waste management (Alexander and Reno 2012: 7-8) increasingly emphasised individual accountability for planetary care. This is so paradoxically framed that it privileges

offering up carefully-sorted waste over reducing waste production. As recycling schemes were rolled out in dense urban environments, low participation was typically ascribed to recalcitrant individuals rather than failed infrastructure. The irony is that many household practices reduce waste but receive scant formal recognition.

Selling off state housing brought scales together: home ownership was supposed to provide citizens with security while asset divestment reduced state financial obligations. But many who bought their homes through Right to Buy were successively hit by unforeseen costs beyond their control: extra liabilities, increased interest rates and unemployment, and CPOs. Far from providing security, such purchases heightened household exposure not only through financialisation but a host of concomitant policies.

Such normative understandings of the moral-economic orders through which thrift appears continually occlude the alternative, resourceful forms of thriftiness pursued by many low-income families. Crucially, where fiscal and ecological reasoning are separated at the scale of policy they form a continuum in household practices that are shaped by a solicitude for the proper and decent care of kin. Thus concern with economic survival is woven through with thrift as an aesthetic to be performed, read and judged whether in vertical class judgments, anxieties over the correct enactment of proper kin care (e.g. buying new or secondhand for children), or lateral censure. Both renting and housebuying may be seen as responsible, or the opposite, depending on how state-citizen relationships are construed and valorised. The potential stigma of failed performance haunts many of these practices. Such thrift and thriving therefore appear as the product of historically-embedded livelihood struggles at the intersection of different scales and practices of thrift and how fundamental needs are construed.

Understanding low-income households not only as extended kin units that may share, pool and redistribute money and labour but may also be enmeshed with and dependent on centralised redistribution in the form of housing, benefits, and infrastructural provision highlights the vulnerability of such aspirations for a good life to changing policy. The sheer complexity of organizing kin groups' resources or extending the lives of objects through exchange, sharing and creative reuse in order to provide, went unremarked in media accounts and stigmatising narratives about estate residents. This then continues the long history of low-income, urban household thrifty practices and budgetary ingenuity being unseen or misrecognised from swopping and exchange to cannily manipulating various forms of credit (cf. James et al 2022).

Kin care is both the aim and the means of household thrift on the estate. Such thrift incorporates the skill of conjuring adequate time, labour, resources, food and care from and for kin networks, the luck of finding leopardskin clothes for some, children's toys for others, and the careful management of moral and economic balances between frugality and celebratory blowouts. Kin relations as the object of thrift can extend backwards and forwards in time, materially pre- and postfigured, sometimes in actions that show how close carefully balanced thriftiness is to the vices of its excesses: hoarding or miserliness. Such actions may be beset by anxiety but may equally generate multiple positive affects where thrift-as-thriving or flourishing is an end in itself.

Much of this echoes Gudeman and Rivera's house economy. The distinction is the urban context and the relative lack of resources such that many urban households must draw on a wide kin network, lacking the luxury of an encapsulated commonwealth. The cruel paradox

is that the deployment of an oikos-centred idea of thrift has unravelled how such localised but distributed households get by. The dispossession and displacement of families caused by such government-level thrift has made it harder for residents to carry out their own thrifty practices based on pooled kinship labour, the latest iteration of enjoining thriftiness upon low income households while removing the means to do so (Cruikshank 1999).

Adam Smith declared self-restraint, that classic attribute of thrift, along with respectability and decorum, to be the great and 'awful' virtues compared with the 'amiable virtues' of compassion and humanity (1759: 41). Smith, of course, was a theorist of the bourgeoisie with its morally cleft spheres of public and domestic concerns (Davidoff and Hall 1987). By contrast, the thrift, and indeed necessary respectability, of low-income, urban households appears as a quintessentially compassionate virtue, expressed through relations of care (The Collective, 2020) but also profoundly susceptible to dislocation and the careless virtue of austerity.

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